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ABSTRACT

To investigate the effects of mutual perceived understanding on the communicators, 86 undergraduate students in a speech communication course were asked to use a 382 item checklist to identify those feelings and sensations that described their own experiences of intense communication. Analysis of subjects' responses showed that 63 items were chosen by over one-third of the students. Six items revealed significant response differences between the sexes, with females having higher proportions in each. Results indicated that perceived mutual understanding was a significant and valued experience, marked by strong feelings of accomplishment and effectiveness, of empathic harmony with another person, of well-being and peace, and of physiological activation. (MM)

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The Effects of Perceived Mutual Understanding in Interpersonal Communication

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Abstract

This study examines perceived mutual understanding, where communicator A perceives that she/he has been understood by communicator B, and where A also perceives that she/he has understood the meanings of communicator B. To arrive at an overview description of the effects of perceived mutual understanding, a 382-item checklist developed by Davitz was employed with 86 college subjects. Sixty-three descriptive statements were selected by the subjects to report perceived mutual understanding as an impactful and valued occurrence, characterized by an enhanced sense of functioning, moving toward the other communicator, comfort with life, physiological activation, and generalized sensations/cognitions of well-being.

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A quarter of a century ago, Van Kaam (1959) asked subjects how they felt when they perceived that they were being understood by another person. Van Kaam's intention was to contribute to the construction of a lawful theory of human experience. Here is the synthetic description of feeling understood arrived at by Van Kaam (p. 69): "a subject, perceiving that a person experiences what things mean to the subject and accepts him, feels, initially, relief from experiential loneliness, and, gradually, safe experiential communion with that person and with that which the subject perceives this person to represent."

Recently, Cahn and Shulman (1982) set out to more fully understand the state of feeling understood, and, using Q-sort and factor analysis, found that subjects who perceive themselves to be understood by another person use these terms to describe that perception: "satisfaction," "relaxation," "pleasure," "good," "acceptance," "comfortableness," "happiness," and "importance." Cahn and Frey (1982) have since demonstrated significant relationships between the perception of being understoood and interpersonal trust and attraction. In an especially interesting study using step-wise multiple-regression analysis, Cahn (1983) found that the most potent predictor of students' evaluations of teachers was the extent to which those students perceived their teachers as understanding them. In fact, 44% of the total variance was accounted for by this predictor, with the next two highest predictors accounting for only 7% and 4% of total variance, and the five remaining predictors combining to account for only 3% of the total variance (including such items as perceptions of the teacher's preparation for class, the ability of the teacher to be intellectually stimulating, and the student's expected course grade). The perception of being understood can have considerable impact upon human activity, and additional research in this area can potentially enhance our ability to explain, predict, and influence human behavior.

The present study is a further effort to explore perceived understanding. Here, however, we will examine the effects of perceived mutual understanding, where communicator A perceives that she/he has been understood by communicator B, and where A also perceives that she/he has understood the meanings of communicator B. Rather than focusing on a one-way communication condition in which a message-source describes the effects of being understood by a message-receiver, the transactional question of concern here is this: How is an interpersonal communicator affected when she/he perceives that there has been a high degree of mutual, two-way understanding created within a communication transaction in which she/he has participated?

Method

Instrument. In order to enable respondents to describe with some precision the effects of perceived mutual understanding, and to do so from a provided vocabulary that would allow for a clear determination of interpersonal consensus, a checklist developed by Davitz (1969) was selected as appropriate. The richness of language, spanning a considerable range of cognitive-physical-affective phenomena, is made available to respondents in an efficient manner through this 382-item checklist, suitable for the measurement of cognitive-physical-affective responses to any stimulus event.

Subjects. Subjects were 86 undergraduate students enrolled in four sections of a course in principles of speech communication at a major southwestern university in the spring of 1982. Over 85% of the respondents were lower-division students, most taking the course as a requirement for graduation with a degree in business. Over 90% were Caucasian. Academically, all of the subjects were within the upper 25% of their high school graduating classes. Females comprised 58% of the sample, and males 42%.

Procedure. During the first week of classes, all subjects were read the following statement (underlines highlighting points of vocalic emphasis):

> Communication is not always easy. For many of us, it sometimes seems that it's just not going our way when it comes to communicating with another person. At times, no matter how hard we seem to try, we don't get through to a particular person, and they don't get through to us. When this happens, we might chalk it up as one of those days, or one of those relationships, or one of those things, or whatever. But all we know for sure is that communication didn't seem to happen, at least not past a certain point. We ran into some kind of a barrier. We walk away feeling frustrated that our communication just didn't go right.
>
> We also find ourselves in other communication experiences where everyone sort of seems to get through to one another, where there seems to be an average level of understanding, with things going along about normally. These are most likely our everday, run-of-the-mill communication encounters.
>
> Then there are yet other communication experiences most all of us have now and again where things go incredibly well--we have the clear feeling that we are truly and sincerely listening to the other person or persons and they to us. At such times there seems to be a lot of understanding going on, a two-way sense of "Yes, I know exactly what you mean!" We are getting through to one another. There is a mutual grasping of feelings, of thoughts, of experiences, of points of view. We walk away from such an interaction sensing that we have really communicated with the other person, that we were really communicating. It is this latter experience that we're going to focus on here.
>
> The present questions is this: exactly what feelings and sensations within you are triggered by this experience of really communicating with another person?

Each respondent also had a duplicate copy of this statement at his or her desk to refer to while completing the 382-item checklist, indicating those items that applied to his or her experience of perceived mutual understanding. Subjects completed the checklist in an average of 35 minutes.

In order for a given item to be included within the consensus overview of the effects of perceived mutual understanding, over one-third (34%+) of

both females and males had to include that item in their checklist responses. This follows the convention set by Davitz for establishing a minimum acceptable level of item inclusion in the descriptive use of the checklist. Response differences between females and males were tested for significance using normal tests of the differences between proportions for independent groups (Snodgrass, 1977).

Results

An overview of the effects of perceived mutual understanding in interpersonal communication is presented in Table 1. Percentages of females and males, respectively, using each descriptive statement are contained in parentheses following each of the 63 items in the table. The statements are organized under cluster headings derived by Davitz.

[Table 1 goes about here]

For 30 of the items in Table 1, or 48% of the total number of items there, over 50% of both females and males selected these items as appropriate descriptors of the effects of perceived mutual understanding. This is a higher proportion of agreement than Davitz's subjects reached 98% of the time in describing 50 major affective states (Davitz, Ch.2). For group data of this sort, the composite picture presented in Table 1 is highly unified. It appears that perceived mutual understanding is identified by subjects as an impactful and valued occurrence, marked by an enhanced sense of functioning, moving toward the other communicator, comfort with life, physiological activation, and generalized sensations/cognitions of well-being.

Six significant response differences were obtained between the sexes, all with females in the higher proportion, as indicated in Table 1.

Conclusion

Perceived mutual understanding in interpersonal communication seems to be a decidedly positive experience, stimulating and satisfying communicators at cognitive-physical-affective levels. The rich descriptive data of Table 1 offer much to ruminate upon.

The variable of sex was not shown to exert a strong, direct influence on the use of the descriptors contained in Table 1. Out of 63 statistical comparisons, some of the half-dozen differences obtained would be expected on the basis of chance alone. It should be noted, however, that there were 13 additional statistically significant differences where females used a descriptor above the pre-set 34% criterion level and males did not (Gordon, 1983). These items are therefore not included in Table 1 as part of the general core description of the effects of perceived mutual understanding, yet this pattern does suggest that sex might play a role in the reporting of such effects. Such a possibility should at least be considered in future research in this area.

It is surprising that there has been such an absence of research on perceived mutual understanding in interpersonal communication, since "understanding" is a concept central to most definitions of "communication" (Dance &

Larson, 1976). The measurement of perceived mutual understanding as an outcome variable in communication research certainly merits investigation, as does the exploration of its antecedents and consequences.

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Table 1

The Effects of Perceived Mutual Understanding in Interpersonal Communication

(Female-Male Percentages, Total N=86)

CLUSTERS:

Enhancement

there is a sense of accomplishment and fulfillment (72/75%); I'm really functioning as a unit (62/77%); a sense of being important and worthwhile (72/56%); I feel strong inside (68/67%), taller, stronger, bigger (62/61%), a sense of being exceptionally strong or energetic (60/53%); I seem to be functioning intellectually at a higher level -- able to think clearly, understand everything (60/53%); I have a sense of sureness that I can do anything, that no obstacle is too great for me (48/56%), there are moments of tremendous strength (56/39%).

Moving Toward

a sense of confidence in being with another person (92/61%)[a]; a sense of trust and appreciation of another person (82/56%)[b]; I want to make others happy (76/64%); there's a sense of being wanted, needed (62/53%); a sense of empathic harmony with another person -- a total concentration on another person, a complete understanding, a communion, a unity, a closeness (68/42%)[c]; there'a a desire to give of myself to another person (64/44%); I want to be tender and gentle (54/47%); I want to

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Significant female-male proportion differences, two-tailed tests:

[a] $z=3.48$. $p<.001$ [b] $z=2.63$, $p<.01$ [c] $z=2.40$, $p<.05$

touch, hold, be close physically to the other person (58/39%); I want to feel with the other person, experience with the other person with every sense, to be psychologically in touch (52/36%); I want to help, protect, please, do something for the other person (50/39%); I want to communicate freely, share my thoughts and feelings with everyone around (36/39%).

Comfort

I'm optimistic and cheerful, the world seems basically good and beautiful, men are essentially kind -- life is worth living, the future seems bright (76/75%); I feel I can really be myself (76/61%); a sense of well-being (70/61%); I feel safe and secure (72/58%); there is an inner warm glow, a radiant sensation, a feeling of warmth all over (66/61%); I am free of conflict, in harmony and at ease with myself, my mind and body seem totally unified (64/61%); I feel like smiling (74/50%)[a]; there's a renewed appreciation of life (66/39%)[b]; a sense of "rightness" with myself and the world, everything is going right for me, nothing can go wrong (60/44%); there is a general release, a lessening of tension, I'm loose and relaxed (60/42%); I'm peaceful, tranquil, in tune with the world (52/36%); a sense of harmony and peace within (48/47%); nothing is a burden, problems fade away and I'm free from worry (42/42%); there's a mellow comfort (38/36%).

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[a] $z=2.29$, $p<.05$ [b] $z=2.48$, $p<.05$

Activation

all my senses seem completely open -- I seem to sense everything immediately, completely, fully, with no separation between me and the outside world (74/86%); I feel excited in a calm way, a warm excitement (72/72%); there's a sense of vitality, an extra spurt of energy or drive, a special lift in everything I do and say, I feel bouncy, springy (74/67%); I feel wide awake, more alert, more alive (64/72%); there's an intense awareness of everything -- I seem to experience things with greater clarity, colors seem brighter, sounds clearer, movements more vivid (66/53%); a sense that I'm experiencing everything fully, completely, thoroughly -- that I'm feeling all the way (66/36%)[a]; a strong sense of interest and involvement in things around me (46/44%).

Hyperactivation

there's an excitement, a sense of being keyed up, overstimulated, supercharged (68/61%); my pulse and heartbeat quicken (52/42%); my blood pressure goes up, blood seems to rush through my body (36/44%); my body seems to speed up (36/39%).

MISCELLANEOUS

I'm more aware of what's going on inside of me (72/58%); it's simple, pure feeling (64/56%); I want others (or the other person) to feel the same as I do (60/61%); there is something complete within me (68/50%); I feel more tolerant, accepting,

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[a] $z=2.75$, $p<.01$

understanding of others (66/50%); it's more an "inner" than an "outer" feeling, a very pleasant feeling (52/50%); I feel outgoing, I want to reach out to everyone I meet (60/44%); I want to give thanks to God (62/42%); there is a sense of nostalgia as old memories crop up and I think of the past (52/47%); I have a sense of being free, uninhibited, open, no longer blocked -- I feel uninhibited and spontaneous, anything goes (54/44%); I want to be with friends (54/44%); I keep thinking how lucky I am (58/39%); sense of belonging with another person, a belonging from which other people are excluded (50/47%); I seem to nurture the feeling within myself, I want the feeling to continue, to keep going (54/42%); I keep thinking about what happened over and over again (42/44%); there is a heightened self awareness (46/36%); a sense of belonging with others (44/36%); the feeling fills me completely (34/42%).